AN ADDRESS

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TO THE

Freeholders

OF

MECKLENBURG COUNTY.

Richmond:

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ADDRESS.

FELLOW-CITIZENS,

THE period, for which I was required to discharge the duties of a station of high responsibility and trust, has now expired, nor can I return among you without grateful acknowledgments for the confidence reposed in me, and for that liberality of sentiment, distinguishable in your character, and by me experienced to a degree far beyond any merit of my own. A recollection of this early testimonial, enforces upon my mind more strongly the obligation, and if no important benefits should result from a course of laborious services, it is a satisfaction to know, that fidelity and an honest zeal have ever characterized my public conduct. I shall present to your view, those subjects of a general nature, which occupied our time and deliberations.

The first that claimed our attention, was the increase of the wages of the members of the present, as well as future legislatures, to four dollars per day, and the same in going to, and returning from, the seat of government.—However correct the principle might have been in the abstract, I am sorry to say, in it, is to be seen that obnoxious feature in relation to themselves, which is to be found in the famous "compensation law," that was denounced by the public sentiment of the country. If the policy be wise in any government, that the legislative body should increase its own pay, it is certainly less so in ours, which has virtue for its basis, and can alone be justified in the first instance, from the necessity resulting to all political institu-

tions, in their original organization. And since the necessity afterwards ceases, the reason with it should cease likewise. With us, the representative character is one of responsibility to the power from which it emanates, and should never be placed beyond its reach, nor shrink from the just scrutiny of public opinion, by which it may be arraigned. What accountability then, can attach to the public agent for *an act in which he* was interested, and may be considered a judge in his own cause, (a principle odious to our government,) when he retires from the trust, with the full benefit of it? The same reason that applies in this case, will not hold good in regard to ordinary acts of legislation, which are liable to be repealed, when opposed to the will of the people; but here, however flagrant may have been the breach, or iniquitous the deed, it is beyond the control of any power to correct it. This view, of itself, was sufficient with me, against the adoption of a principle that can be claimed only by the force of mere right.

But, another consideration operated upon my mind against the policy of the increase, arising from its injustice, and the present condition of our finances, and not because I considered the existing compensation as amply sufficient.— It will be recollected, that during the late war with Great Britain, a considerable debt was contracted on the part of the State with her citizens, for conducting it to a successful issue, relying upon the faith and magnanimity of the General Government to refund it. After the happy termination of this contest, the first act of legislation, (which I must be permitted to say, was fraught with the most glaring injustice,) gave this claim to the Literary Fund, that should have been applied to the discharge of the debt, by which a diminution of the taxes might have been effected,

that were borne with a firmness equal to the occasion that demanded them. The truth is, they have been continued to a height, which more difficult times would render burthensome, to extinguish a debt by the annual payment of about forty-eight thousand dollars of its interest, which the General Government has nearly liquidated. However laudable may have been the zeal to augment that fund, the end could not have justified the means that accomplished it, by an indirect mode of taxation; an act they would not directly have avowed, much less executed.

It too often happens, unfortunately for the world, that mankind, guided by ambitious views, and considerations of personal aggrandizement, seek the establishment of their fame on the ruins of the people's rights. Although the taxes may not be grievous, yet they are little less than those which existed in the worst of times; and should we be again visited with the like calamities, the Legislature must with an ill grace require more, as would be the case, since the revenue little more than exceeds the expenditures.—— Whether it be bad policy or not, in a nation, to exhibit a treasury rich in funds, it can never be a good one in us to present so beggarly an account as will appear at the commencement of the next fiscal year. Whenever this act of injustice to the people was properly atoned for, or in some degree repaired, I should be disposed to do justice to their servants, as well as to other public officers, and without presenting that anomaly in legislation, which is not permitted by the laws of the land of being "generous to ourselves before we are just to others."

The system of Education commenced during the last session, has been farther promoted by the adoption of the Central College in Albemarle for an University. How-

ever I was opposed to the manner in which the fund for this purpose has been in part accumulated, and entertaining an honest fear that complete success cannot for a time crown the whole, its importance we all must acknowledge, as connected with the best interest of the country, and liberty of the citizen. Whilst other States have done much for the encouragement of letters, it has been left for us to lay the foundation of a system, that promises the most extensive diffusion of useful knowledge. It is not, that we stand so much in need of a primary grade of education, almost within the reach of every citizen at this time, but of those higher branches, by which our moral natures are confirmed, and the happiness of our fellow-beings is secured. It is equally important to the citizen, that he should know and understand his civil and political rights, as well as his relative duties in society, which can never be acquired in so great a degree as by the extension of a system that will "form the Statesman, the Legislator and Judge, upon whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend." Neither is the object without interest in the prospect, when we consider the vast capital annually carried into foreign States for the support of productive labour, which would otherwise be used to the augmentation of our own, by the employment of its industry.

With a proper view of this subject, is connected its policy, that may be said to form a cement by which the affections of the people are allied to the soil of their birth, and to the faith of their institutions. Parents and guardians, while they send their children and wards abroad for their education, subject them more to the lures of vice and dissipation,

as they are far removed beyond their control and inspection, and they too frequently return home like the young people in Europe who travel in foreign countries, more conceited and extravagant, with a predilection for customs and habits uncongenial with those of their countrymen. And instead of those morals, which were early implanted in the bosom, being ripened into usefulness, they become either weakened or entirely effaced. If destined by nature to fill an important political sphere, he finds it difficult to accommodate himself to the manners of a people which a course of education has rendered widely different from his own, and to play a part upon a theatre where he appears so much the stranger. To illustrate this idea more forcibly, I can appeal for aid to my own feelings. For, if there is a fortune I deem unkind, it is that which placed me within the bosom of a foreign state to drink the fountain of knowledge. It would be unnatural to forget those who were the cotemporaries of my youth, the inmates of my bosom, the joint tenants of all my toils, or even the kind mother that gave me milk. But when I was entrusted with the functions of a public servant in my own native land, they were not with me, co-operating in a common cause, under the influence of those principles of fellowship generated in the hey-day of youth, by which unanimity of action is produced, feuds and jealousies destroyed, so essential to the pure stream of correct deliberation.

An ineffectual attempt was again made to repeal the existing laws against usury. However plausible may appear the reasons in its favour, they should not be readily admitted without due caution and investigation. And I must confess the more my mind has been brought to an enquiry upon the subject, the more firmly has it resulted in a con-

viction of its impolicy. Whether it be "prejudice" or the wisdom of ages, that we are disposed to respect, we should not controvert that prejudice or wisdom, unless we are sure that truth will light our way in the result.

Money has ever been considered an instrument of commerce, by which the commodities of a country are circulated, and possessing no other value than that, by which those articles are estimated; although for its use, it is not deemed immoral to give a price, yet it has been correctly said, "the success of trade requires that price to be inconsiderable," and the argument is not good, that, because given at all, it should be permitted to a degree amounting to extortion, which would be highly immoral: the high rate of interest argues the want of capital in a country, but it is not true as contended, that by its increase, the deficiency will be supplied, and consequently the price reduced. The capital of a country being the same, while the annual goods circulated by it are increased, will be enhanced in value, and require a less quantity to purchase them, and property will be diminished in proportion to its increased value: and the price if unrestrained by law, would rise to a height oppressive in the extreme. The value would be in a ratio, precisely equal to the demand of the increased products of the labour of the country. It would be borrowed by prodigals and projectors, who contribute not to the wealth and improvement of the country, but subtract so much, that would otherwise be employed to the beneficial purposes of society. It is these characters that have given a value to money, which the profits of trade will not justify. If it be good policy then to encourage extravagance, speculation, and extortion, it is right to have no law upon the subject. The sober and industrious part of the community will give

no more for the use of money, than the profits of stock admit, and consequently would not enter into the competition. Admit that a greater quantity of capital should be brought into market, (which is disproved by the fact that the capital of the country is not idle but actively employed,) it would be the capital of a foreign state of less value than our own, that will drive it from circulation to seek a more profitable employment. Holland, it is true, where the interest of money is probably lower than in any other country, imposes no restraint upon its use. This however, is owing to the redundancy of her capital, which the commercial purposes and active industry of her citizens, are not capable of absorbing, and it must go to supply the foreign demand.

But it is said the rate of interest increases in proportion to the severity of the law prohibiting it, and hence is the absurdity of a law inoperative in its effects. If this argument proves any thing, it proves too much, and would go to deny any restraint upon the liberty of the citizen, for the benefit of society; and if your laws have been ineffectual towards the entire suppression of vice, villany, and immorality, is it a good reason, that no law should exist at all upon the subject? or that extortion, which is held to be immoral and unjust, since it is practised, should therefore be legalized? It is true, that punishments should always bear a just proportion to their crimes, and it does not appear, that the law prohibiting Usury is so highly penal, as to destroy its execution. Nor is it believed the high rate of interest in the eastern countries, is to be ascribed to the severity of the law, but to the poverty of the people and the insecurity of contracts, which has led to the remark, that "there is no proportion between the actual possession of a sum, and the hope of receiving it again after having lent it."

While you would leave the people to themselves in this respect, you present the curious absurdity of establishing a rate of interest, by which a distinction is made in contracts, to the prejudice of those most favoured in law. The Banks must likewise be restricted, which would produce an inequality of rights, between one class of citizens and another. The injustice would operate like the greatest severity, whilst the temptation to evil would be much stronger, and through their instrumentality a scene of oppression might be witnessed more alarming and ruinous in its consequences than it is possible to conceive. The object of Government is to protect the weak against the strong, and it has been justly said, that, "in every branch of trade the oppression of the poor must establish the monopoly of the rich, who by engrossing the whole to themselves will be able to make large profits." They would perform precisely the same office in the country, that the Banks do in the towns, by withdrawing into a narrow compass the circulating medium, and their debtors would have to give a Shylock's bond.

There is one other point of view in which this subject deserves to be considered. It should be the first object with us all, to protect and encourage the agricultural interest of the country. So far as this is effected, the happiness of our fellow beings is promoted, the productive labour of the country, and consequently the wealth of society, increased. If more can be made from the use of money than in any other way, it is certain, that it will not be employed in the support of the productive, but in maintaining the unproductive class, which contributes in a very small degree towards the wealth of the community. No individual will subject himself to the management of an estate, the annual profits of which, bear so small a proportion to the same

capital, when placed at interest: much less will he apply the surplus over and above replacing the expenditures to its improvement. The policy of good husbandry as well as the interest of society requires, that the profits of stock arising from agricultural labours, should be destined to replace the same capital with a profit, which adds to the improved condition of the country.

The bill to establish a Bank at Danville (at the proper stage of which I should have availed myself of the opportunity to have brought to view the claims of Clarkesville, for an office of Discount and Deposit) was superseded by a resolution, that passed the House of Delegates, authorising a meeting of the stockholders of the Bank of Virginia, to take into consideration the propriety of locating a Branch of said Bank at Danville, but was rejected by the Senate. Upon this subject I forbear to say more, as it would far exceed the limits of this address.

The Revision of the Laws has been much the most anxious, as well as laborious duty of our labours, to which the public attention has been drawn with no small concern. By a correct compilation of those of a general nature under their proper heads, and comprised within a convenient volume or volumes, an easy access will be given to every citizen, to know and properly understand his rights, and the laws by which they are protected. The House of Delegates looking more to this grand object, than to an improvement of the system, made those amendments only, which were obviously correct; the Senate however introduced some important changes into the Code, which it is hoped will be for the better. Upon the completion of this great work, we shall have reason to congratulate ourselves with the prospect, that future sessions will be shorter.

These sentiments, Fellow Citizens, are submitted with great deference to your better judgments, which I shall never cease to respect, and with a feeling, no language can describe, when I recollect those to whom I owe more than a heart filled with gratitude can pay.

I am, Fellow Citizens,

Your obedient Servant,

M. ALEXANDER, Jun.